Double-dipped integrationist speaks out

by John Norton

You go to private schools
and eighteen years later,
your child finishes and says,
"Mama, the world isn't all white;
the world isn't all beautiful;
the world isn't all rich. I see
poor people; I see dark-skinned
people, and I see yellow-skinned
people. It's not like you said
at all."

From a speech by Mooney Player
delivered to a Deadline '72 audience

(To the tune of "Give My Love to Rose")
We don't have a football team or dances
We only have one blackboard
We don't have a bell
I wonder what's the use in runnin' from the truth
And meeting in the Old Rose Motel.

From a song by Hayes Mizell
refering to the Lancaster Christian Academy

"Deadline '72 and I probably have more things in common tempermentally than we have differences," Hayes Mizell said as he leaned over the desk in his cluttered office. Strange words coming from the director of the American Friends Service Committee's South Carolina Community Relations Program and arch-enemy of Lower Richland football coach Mooney Player and his Deadline '72 crowd.

But the words were typical of the candid, and often surprising, comments elicited during an hour-long interview with the youngest member of the Richland County District One school board--a civil rights activist accused by Player of completely controlling District One education, and a man described by the local press as having "radical obsessions."

Mizell was in the midst of discussing the group formed several months ago for the specified purpose of electing five candidates to the board in the November elections "...who will be able to devote the time and effort to take control from Mizell"--a position they adopted after discovering his term does not expire until 1974.

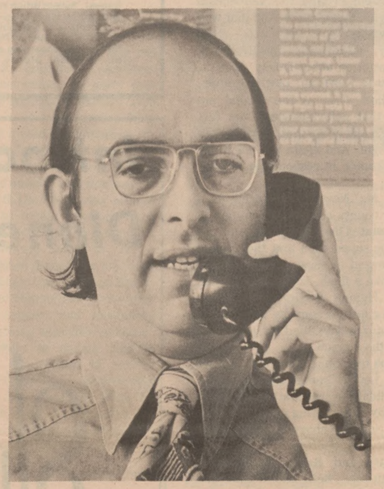
Observing the balding, bespectacled Mizell as he sat casually among the piles of documents and news clippings amiably answering questions, it was difficult to believe he was the infamous educational reformer--target of dozens of vitriolic attacks since he first took over AFSC's desegregation program in 1966.

The office walls were covered with souvenirs from those battles--campaign posters from the 1970 election when he won his seat on the school board; a plaque designating him as the recipient of the James McBride Dabbs award "for outstanding personal contributions to the cause of justice in South Carolina;" a multi-colored jock strap embroidered with the words "Scratch Deadline '72"--which he insisted was a gift.

From time to time, as he made reference to a past event, Mizell gestured toward a huge stack of manila folders stuffed with clippings and manuscripts. "It's all right here in my archives," he said half-jokingly. "All the bits and pieces of the last six years."

A quick glance through the folders removed any doubt about Mizell's activist role in community and educational affairs:

MIZELL PROBES SCHOOL TROUBLES
MIZELL FIGHTS DESEGREGATION SLOWDOWN
ACTIVIST ONE-MAN CIVIL RIGHTS OFFICE
MIZELL'S UNYEILDING STANCE TARGET FOR CRITICS
INTEGRATIONIST WINS RACE
MIZELL IS KEY TO HUMAN RELATIONS GROUP
FORMER SCHOOLS NEEDLER NOW ACTIVIST ON BOARD
MIZELL: I'M NOT WIDE-EYED RADICAL
MIZELL CONDEMNS STERILIZATION PROPOSAL



The archives also indicated the civil rights worker was not simply a local devil's advocate, but a nationally-recognized authority on education--particularly in the area of desegregation. The folders contained magazine articles and newspaper stories appearing in publications like South Today, The New York Times, Newsweek, The Washington Post, New South, and dozens of eastern seaboard papers, all quoting Mizell's statements or testimony on various issues.

Born in North Carolina, the 33-year old former history teacher (and archivist), has spent all but a year of his life in the South and his regional loyalties are strong--as indicated by a statement attributed to him in Esquire: "The South is at the beginning of a period during which we can either so structure our social, public and political institutions that they will be unique in quality and humanity in this nation, or we can plunge into the same abyss of chaos and conflict which has so swiftly engulfed the technological greatness of the North."

Mizell's activism dates as far back as the early sixties, when while attending USC as a graduate student in history, he and a friend joined a group of Benedict students in a lunch counter sitting at Woolworth's department store in Columbia.

"To get some lunch?" I asked.

"Well, we hadn't eaten," he laughed. "The whole thing happened almost by accident. We went uptown to see a sit-in--my friend and I were involved in a sort of student program sponsored by the Council on Human Relations (an organization which he now serves as a board member), and we were participating with the Benedict students in a very primary human relations thing...you know, I Am White, You Are Black, We Can Talk To Each Other. We asked one of the black students if we could do anything, and he said, 'Yeah, you can go in and sit down," so we did."

The students were refused service, Mizell said, and as he and his friend left, their photographs were taken by SLED agents.

"A picture of this friend of mine was then circulated to the dean of the graduate school, who was a professor in the history department as well. We decided we should go see him and give him our side of the story. He allowed as how his department liked activists of neither stripe on campus and suggested we cool it."

"That was about all that came of it," Mizell said. "Except of course that nine years later I joined the dean on the District One school board." We both laughed.

Although Mizell insists the sit-in was his "one incidence of direct action," a review of his news clippings indicates he is either modest or absent-minded.

From 1964 to 1966, he served as director of the National Student Association's Southern Student Human Relations project. "It was sort of a southwide smorgasbord of issues...until the money kind of ran out," Mizell said. "So I came here about March, 1966 to be the director of what was then called the NAACP Legal Defense Fund--American Friends Service Committee School Desegregation Task Force." He laughed. "Which was me."

Mizell began his rise to infamy over the next several years through a series of testimonies before various federal committees and educational groups--and again found himself involved in direct action.

In July, 1969, he organized a six hour sit-in with citizens from South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi in the office of U.S. Attorney John Mitchell to protest softening of federal school desegregation policies. Unsatisfied with Mitchell's response, Mizell returned to Columbia and resigned from his position on the state advisory board of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, stating that the easing of HEW guidelines "...only serves to highlight the impotency of the commission and those of us who serve it."

In November, 1969, Mizell and two other Columbia civil rights workers demonstrated before the annual conference of the National Municipal League, successfully blocking the presentation to Columbia of its third All-America City award by arguing that the city was insensitive "to the needs of poor and minority people."

In 1970 after an unsuccessful attempt in 1968, Mizell won election to the District One School board--amidst charges in the local press that he was an "avowed and outspoken arch-integrationist" and was placed on the ballot by the county Democratic machine.

Mizell, however, attributed his victory to hard campaigning--neither of the other two candidates campaigned at all--and strong support from the black community where he had won respect as an advocate of civil rights.

"And quite frankly," Mizell told me, "I think a lot of people still didn't know who I was or what I stood for."

Since the Republicans failed to nominate a school board candidate, Mizell was officially unopposed after the June primary. Unofficially, however, strong opposition was building to his election. A week after the primary, Mizell went before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity and charged that Columbia's District One desegregation plan just approved by HEW would almost certainly promote resegregation.

"In April, I had made a commitment to go and testify before Senator Mondale's committee," Mizell explained. "After the primary, I had to figure out, sort of as a matter of living with myself, how I should handle the situation. Should I go as I normally would go, making sure the media had the testimony and so forth or should I now realize that this was a different situation, and I ought to sort of compromise the way I operate. And I just chose not to do that."

As he walked through the airport after his return trip, Mizell was greeted by the headline: "School Board Hopeful Criticizes Mixing Plan--Mizell Tells Senate Panel: 'Enclaves Intact.' "

"Then came the write-in candidate," Mizell laughed.

Citizens opposed to Mizell's way of thinking began frantically searching for a write-in candidate. James H. Sikes, chairman of the Concerned Parents' Association, vowed he would withdraw from his Republican house race to run "if that's what it takes to beat Mizell's radical thinking."

Mizell's opposition finally drafted Thomas N. Bagnal, a Columbia builder and prominent civic leader. Bagnal received numerous endorsements, including one from The State, who labeled Mizell as a "double-dipped integrationist" and accused him of playing partisan politics. "At the local level," The State wrote "school boards are no place to play politics. The cause of education should transcend partisan affiliation, as we expect will be shown in November with the write-in election of Mr. Bagnal."

The press did not fight the battle alone. The Richland County Republican Party held a press conference to endorse Bagnal, and Rep. Floyd Spence, then a Republican candidate for U.S. Congress, purchased an ad with his own campaign money, declaring, "To prevent ultra-liberal zealots from taking over, I urge the people...to support Tom Bagnal for the school board."

"It was a very effective effort," Mizell told me. "There was nothing I could do; I had to just let myself be at the mercy of the voters."

The voters were just merciful enough. In the general election, Mizell edged by Bagnal by only 2,000 votes--making the write-in campaign one of the most successful in the state's history.

"The only reason I was able to win at all," Mizell said, "was because I was riding in on John West's coattails."

"...but I know full well I'm not going to be able to stay in Columbia, because I've burned my bridges as I've gone..."

Mizell continued in his advocacy role after his election to the school board. In May of the following year, he and Columbia attorney Thomas Broadwater addressed an anti-war rally at Wofford, Mizell's alma mater. Shortly afterward, Mizell began a protest directed against the nomination of former U.S. Rep. Albert Watson to a seat on the U.S. Military Court of Appeals.

Mizell wrote to Sen. Birch Bayh, D-Ind., stating that Watson was both "unqualified and undeserving" of the nomination and asked Bayh's aid.

Mizell's AFSC news letter, "Your Schools", was the first publication to print the text of Watson's now-famous Lamar speech in which he suggested that Lamar citizens oppose the desegregation of the schools by using "...every means at your disposal to defend against what I consider an illegal order of the circuit court of the United States." Fearing an instant replay of the disastrous Haynesworth and Carswell nominations, the Republican administration ruled Watson out of the running.

During the interview, I asked Mizell about his advocacy role in South Carolina. "There's nothing especially courageous or insightful about me," he insisted. "It's almost like we're all playing our assigned roles and this happens to be mine. There have to be some people whose only interest is the public interest--who aren't responsible to any particular segment of the community. I don't have to be concerned with my livelihood, or the fact that I'm trying to work my way up within "X" organization, or that I'm trying to be politically 'responsible' because I have all these debts I want to pay.

"That's why there are a lot of people across the board who don't particularly like the way I do things."

A large portion of the interview naturally dealt with the most recent controversy involving Mizell--the attempts by Mooney Player and Deadline '72 to end what they describe as his powerful influence over the local school board.

Mizell has labeled the group's charges "patently absurd." When asked if he could, in his own mind, find reasons for the charges, he said, "Well, I don't think they really believe it. There are people who may believe it once it's said, but I think the people who are in the leadership of Deadline '72 sort of picked me out as a very convenient and vulnerable target because I'm vocal---I say things other school board members don't say. It's natural for them to focus their attention on me and say, 'We've got to overcome his influence,' but I can't believe they really think I control the school board or influence it that much."

"You've stated before that you haven't seen any positive alternatives to the present situation from the Deadline '72 people" I said. "Since you made that statement, do you think they've come up with anything?"

"No. And they say they're not concerned with any alternatives; what they're concerned with is getting 'five courageous men' on the school board, whatever that means. They may have in mind something they want to do--and I don't know if that's reverting to the dual system or what--but they haven't made it at all clear."

"But they've been very insistent about the fact that they're not after a dual system--that they're not segregationists. Player particularly is prone to say things like 'Integration is here to stay.' "

"Yes", Mizell replied, "but Mr. Player, in the next breath after he says that, will say, 'All right, if we only get four (instead of five) of our candidates on the school board, that will be a defeat, because that won't be enough to counter the influence of Hayes Mizell which is patently ridiculous. And then some newsman will ask, 'Well, Mr. Player, what are you going to do if you only get four, or you don't win?' And Player will answer, 'Well, I'll probably have to think about leaving they school system and going elsewhere.' To me that says that Player is not really interested in working to achieve a unitary school system. What he's interested in is his own skin."

Mizell continued. "There are a lot of things I don't like about the schools and the school system. There are a lot of things that make me think, 'Oh, if I were only running the show, it would be vastly better than it is now.' But at the same time, I've got enough sense to know that's not going to happen. You've got to work to alter the system within that system, if you really believe there's some strength and basis to public education. And when somebody tells me, 'Well, things aren't going the way I like so I'm going to pull up and leave;' then I seriously question their commitment to public education and to what you have to do to achieve an effective, meaningful, humane, integrated system.'

"What does Player have to gain then?" I asked.

"Well, of course there are all kinds of rumors," Mizell said. "That he's going to pull out and form his own private school, or that he has some other agenda in mind. I don't know whether that's true or not. But if he's going to be so narrow as to say 'if we only get four, that's a loss,' then I wonder if he's beginning to prepare people for the fact that there is going to be a loss, making him the hero who made the last ditch stand--'Our last chance to save public education,' as he puts it.

"Then he withdraws and goes somewhere else leaving, of course, all those other folks right where they are, if they can't afford or if it's not convenient for them to pick up and go wherever he's going.

"Suppose Mooney Player and Deadline '72 manage to get their slate of candidates elected," I said. "What sort of effect do you think they would have?"

"If they think they've got problems now in the school system," Mizell answered, "then wait until you get a bunch of folks on the board who are all more or less the same ideologically--who do things the same way. I don't mean by that a middle-of-the-road position; I mean a position where they say 'We don't know what we're going to do; we're just going to do something.' I think that would be a disaster."

"If the Deadliners are elected, are they going to discover anything about the school board they don't know now?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. When they get on the school board, they're going to find out what it's like to deal with a problem--what it is to make a decision when the buck stops here. They'll have to make decisions that are going to be received with no joy by any segment of the population, or decisions which are going to come down clearly in favor of one segment of the population.

"I would like to see them in a situation," he said, "where they have to face the consequences of a decision which is going to make all the people on one side of town happy and on the other side unhappy--or a decision which is going to make all the white folks happy, but is going to make black folks mad as hell.

"I find there are very few people who want to make decisions. They don't want to have to come to grips with what the imponderable is. It's much easier when you're outside of the system to say, 'Well, why don't you do this'--because you don't have all the available options laid in front of you, or some speculation as to what all the possible consequences of a decision might be."

I asked Mizell in what way he felt his role on the school board had been effective.

"Well, my role has been that I've got nothing to lose. I have no intention or desire to be a long-time school board member. I don't aspire to any political office. I'm literally there for the moment, so that means I can say whatever I have to say without very many restraints. I can do what has to be done and say what has to be said.

"If I don't do anything else," he said, "if I have no influence or effect on the school board, one thing I set out to do has been accomplished and that is that people are not taking that office for granted. It's just awful that in 1968 and in 1970, the only people running for school board other than the incumbents were civil rights types.

"But now there are people running, and whether they're more interested or whether it's just part of the 'If he can do it, anybody can do it' syndrome doesn't make any difference. They now see that it's an office of some importance and that's one thing I care very much about--that people take that position more seriously."

"Then you don't think everybody on the board should be a civil rights activist?" I asked.

"If everybody on the board thought just like me," Mizell said, "I think it would be terrible. I really think if you're going to have an elective body, it does need to represent various views in the community."

"Do you feel the board does that now? Does it have a pretty good composition?"

"Yes. You know, there a lot of people who see me as being very much of a hard-liner, as not being able to compromise or yeild. And yet the fact of the matter is that next year's school desgregation plan does represent a compromise on my part. I don't like the fact that we have seven all-black schools in the district, just like I don't like the fact that we're turning one that was desegregated into an all-black school. But when you have a group of seven people sitting there, trying to come up with a plan, there's going to be a good deal of give and take. They gave, and I gave, and it was a kind of interesting and enlightening experience for that reason."

"Your opponents," I said, "often insinuate that your advocacy role--the fact that you make a living as an advocate--creates a conflict of interest. They say your position as an advocate makes you unable to truly represent the community that elected you to the school board."

Mizell sighed. "Well, of course, if that were true, then every vote and every action I take on the school board would be exactly compatible with my professional position, and that's just not the case. My professional position is that there ought to be no segregation and no discrimination, yet when I go to the school board, I ultimately vote for a plan that calls for it. I think I understand what the constitutional obligation is, so I'm going to be as definite as I can about that, but ultimately I'm going to have to make the decision, and that decision is not always compatible with the official position have in my office."

"Doesn't that tend to make you a little schizophrenic?"

"Yes...because there...you know, I just find its a sort of lonely, frustrating kind of existence. I have as much or greater need for, you know, the Lions Club to give me the award of--whatever--as anybody else, yet I ALWAYS KNOW I'm not going to get that. I'd like to stay in Columbia after my work with the American Friends Service Committee is finished, but I know full well I'm not going to be able to stay in Columbia, because I've burned my bridges as I've gone. It's you know, I wouldn't mind getting off the school board right now, as far as that goes, because it's not that pleasant an experience."

I asked Mizell if he planned to run again for the board.

"I seriously doubt it," he answered.

"What do you think your chances would be?"

"Well, of course, that's a couple of years away. But if I had to run right now," he laughed, "I'd by obliterated."

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